

AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

Mr. REID. Mr. President, the majority leader can't seem to let the facts as they exist get in the way of his ideology. The facts are that the Affordable Care Act is working, and 16.5 million people are proof of that because they have access to health care, most of whom did not have it before.

In the light of day, it has been shown that private insurance companies were taking advantage of the American people. They cannot do that now under the Affordable Care Act. Companies that are proposing these huge rate increases simply won't get them. Understand that 80 percent of every dollar that is charged by an insurance company in premiums—80 percent of it—has to go toward caring for people. If it doesn't, there are rebates, and hundreds of thousands of Americans during the last few years have gotten rebates as a result of insurance companies not spending 80 percent of the money they are getting in premiums for health care.

The sad commentary is that insurance companies took advantage—took advantage by not insuring people who had preexisting disabilities. One “disability” that insurance companies said was preexisting was the fact that you are a woman. Some insurance companies charged more for the same care if you are a woman and not a man. We have wide-ranging evidence that was in existence before and I guess my Republican colleagues want back again where insurance companies determine how much—they could arbitrarily cut off insurance to someone. They had these arbitrary limits. They can't do that anymore. Senior citizens have received millions of benefits from the Affordable Care Act. They get a wellness check every year for no cost at all. They no longer have to worry about the hole in the doughnut, so to speak, as we call it, on coverage for their prescriptions.

There are many things we can talk about. The fact is that the Affordable Care Act is working, and we are going to continue to defend it as the American people want us to do.

AMENDMENT NO. 1521

Mr. REID. Mr. President, this afternoon the Senate will vote on an important amendment offered by a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, the Senator from Rhode Island, JACK REED, who is also the ranking member of the Armed Services Committee.

I commend Senator REED for the stellar job he has done in being a manager of this bill. He is one of the most thoughtful and responsible Members of the Senate and always has been. He has great legislative experience, having served in the House before he came here.

Senator REED's amendment addresses a major threat to our national security and the middle class—sequestration.

Sequestration refers to deep, mindless, automatic cuts throughout the government. These cuts were authorized 4 years ago to force Congress to reduce the deficit in a balanced way.

Unfortunately, they did not work. Republicans are unwilling to close even a single tax loophole—not a single tax loophole to reduce the deficit. Now we face the prospect of arbitrary and unreasonable cuts that were once assumed to be so stupid that Congress would not allow them to happen. But something that everyone thought was stupid is now official Republican policy. Unless we can reach a bipartisan agreement to fix sequestration, these cuts will occur, not smoothly but as if done by a meat cleaver.

That threatens not only our military security but also the economic security of America's middle class, which really is our national security. The bill aims to avoid sequestration for the Defense Department with a widely ridiculed budget loophole, which would put actual defense spending on the Nation's credit card, increasing our deficit and our debt.

I am stunned by my friend, the senior Senator from Arizona. When I was an appropriator, I was on this Senate floor and I watched him, with his staff in the back of the room every time we did an appropriations bill. He pored through line by line with his staff of every appropriations bill. If there was something he thought was askew he would object to it. We got used to that because, frankly, it saved money over time.

He referred to all the pork that was in these bills, and he and I disagreed on what was determined to be pork, but I understood where he was coming from. I am just flabbergasted now that the senior Senator from Arizona, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, is agreeing to a one-time gimmick. All the experts have said these gimmicks don't work—especially this one. Now, the committee, led by my friend the senior Senator from Arizona, is agreeing to this gimmick. Think of that. The Republicans, led by the senior Senator from Arizona, are advocating deficit spending big time—not a little bit, big time—tens of billions of dollars.

Our troops deserve better than this. Meanwhile, unless we deal with the impact of sequestration more broadly, middle-class America will suffer drastic cuts in things that matter to them the most—cuts in priorities such as education, job creation, and lifesaving research. Sequestration of nondefense programs is also an attack on our military families. For example, sequestration threatens to cut VA spending, health care spending for the military, job training for returning veterans, schools that teach children of military families, and heating assistance for veterans who are struggling.

If we are going to be fair to military families, just as to millions of other working Americans, we need to fix sequestration for more than just the Pen-

tagon. We need to fix it for defense and nondefense programs jointly. Defense and nondefense are inextricable. They are certainly things we cannot separate.

That is what the Reed amendment is designed to change through bipartisan negotiations. There is no reason to wait to negotiate a bipartisan budget. It makes no sense to start spending extra money on defense or anything else until we agree on an overall plan. Put simply, we ought to budget first and spend later. That is the only responsible way for a family or our Nation to conduct its business.

That is why the Reed amendment makes so much sense. I urge my colleagues to support the Reed amendment. A plan that avoids unnecessary cuts to priorities such as education, job creation, and research is what the Reed amendment is all about. It is a plan that funds all agencies that protect our security, including the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Drug Enforcement Administration—all of these vital programs. It is a plan that funds our troops, protects military families, and makes the long-term investment needed to ensure a secure, prosperous future for all Americans.

Less than 2 years ago, Democrat PATTY MURRAY and Republican PAUL RYAN proved it could be done. Let's put an end to the games and gimmicks and start putting together a responsible budget.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business for 1 hour, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each, with the time equally divided, with the majority controlling the first half and the Democrats controlling the final half.

The Senator from South Dakota.

NATIONAL DEFENSE
AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, last fall, Republicans promised that if we were elected to the majority in the Senate, we would get the Senate working again. A big part of that is getting the appropriations process working again. When the Senate is functioning properly, 12 separate appropriations bills are considered individually in the Appropriations Committee and then brought to the Senate floor for debate and amendment.

This process is designed to allow Senators to carefully examine programs and consider the best and most responsible way to distribute funding. But the